

Appleby Archaeology Group

Medieval Friaries

The Appleby Archaeology Group and visitors enjoyed an interesting talk at their November meeting from Barbara Harbottle on Medieval Friaries. Miss Harbottle had researched several of the friaries which she described.

She began by explaining that around 1215 St Francis of Assisi founded the first order of friars. This was to be a new and vigorous approach to religious life and differed from the monastic system in that friars saw themselves as missionaries, preacher and educators, attached to an order but able to move within the community and from site to site. Monks had local stability bound to their monasteries. Friaries were built in centres of population, they were urban foundations.

There were two principal orders, the Dominicans and the Fransiscans. The Dominicans or Black Friars arrived in England in 1221. They were interested in the training and education of scholars and went first to Oxford. There was a rapid growth in the number of their friaries in 1260 there were 35 by 1348, 57. The Fransiscans or Grey Friars arrived three years later going first to Canterbury, by the 14th century they had 60 houses. There were other lesser orders these included the

Augustinian friars or Austins and the Carmelites or White Friars.

Twenty one friaries were set up in the north of England between 1231 and 1291. Four orders had houses in Newcastle, in Carlisle there were Dominican and Franciscan friaries, in Penrith an Augustinian house and in Appleby a Carmelite friary was founded in 1281. Friaries were established at Alnwick, Bamburgh, Barnard Castle, Berwick, Durham, Hartlepool and Jarrow. Five of the friaries were short lived and all were dissolved by 1538/39.

Miss Harbottle then talked about the friary buildings and the evidence from local archaeological research, showing slides to illustrate the features described. Two sites where evidence of friary buildings are readily seen are Hulne Park at Alnwick, a Carmelite friary and the Dominican friary at Blackfriars, Newcastle.

Friaries were on the periphery of towns each covering a fair acreage. The buildings, including ancillary buildings such as stables and breweries, were within a precinct. The central area, the cloister, was surrounded by ranges which would house the refectory and dormitories, covered walks around the cloister provided access to these buildings. The cloister was a place for recreation and fresh air, evidence from scratch marks

suggests that shove halfpenny and hopscotch may have been played!

The friary churches, orientated east west, were rectangular and formed by two buildings the choir and the nave. When the church needed to be enlarged an aisle or a new church was built. There was a walking space between the choir and nave, pierced by a central arch which might carry a tower. The pulpit was in the nave and from there the friars would preach to the community at large. Services in the choir would be for the order.

There is documentary evidence to suggest that there were libraries but there is no structural evidence. An intriguing footnote was the idea that the friars had study bedrooms. The clues to this are the arrangement of windows and the divisions in walls which can be seen at a site in Gloucester.

An informative evening was concluded by the speaker answering questions from the floor.